

**Anselm Kiefer:
making sense of the senseless**

Anselm Kiefer (Donaueschingen, Germany, 1945 – Paris, France, currently)

Born just months before the final European battle of World War II, Anselm Kiefer grew up witnessing the consequences of modern warfare and the division of his homeland. He experienced the rebuilding of a fragmented nation and its struggle for renewal. The artist dedicated himself to investigating the interwoven patterns of German mythology and history and the way they contributed to the rise of Fascism. Many of his paintings—immense landscapes and architectural interiors, often encrusted with sand and straw—invoke Germany’s literary and political heritage; references abound to the *Song of the Nibelung*, a German epic poem from the Middle Ages or to Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler (1889–1945). In one of his earliest projects, his 1969 Occupations (Besetzungen) series, Kiefer photographed himself mimicking the Nazi salute at various sites in France, Italy, and Switzerland. Following his move to southern France in the early 1990s, Kiefer’s iconography expanded to encompass more universal themes of civilization, culture, and spirituality, drawing upon such sources as alchemy, ancient myths, and the Kabbalah.

Kiefer became one of the foremost representatives of Neo-Expressionism, an approach characterized by violent, gestural brushwork. Bright color and strong light are not usually present in his works: images are cloudy, veiled, and show twilight scenes, painted with gray as the dominating color. His large-scale works combine a nearly monochromatic palette with mixed media, including materials such as ash, plaster, seeds, soil, straw, and strips of lead. Experimenting with materials is of great importance to Kiefer’s creative process. The chosen material acquires a symbolic meaning when understood in combination with the subject matter. The objects that are gathered in his works transcend their physical identities and speak for themselves, showing the artist’s obsessions through rich association and metaphors. Sand, flowers, dry branches, straw, and the iron objects all show Kiefer’s fascination with metamorphosis. Lead becomes a key material, both for its physical properties and great transformation capacity, as for its relationship with alchemy and the Kabbalah. (*Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*)

“For me, art is the only possibility to establish a connection between things that make no sense and those that have a meaning. I see history as something synchronized, both if it refers to the Sumerians or to German mythology. As far as I am concerned, old sagas are not old at all. Neither is the Bible. When you look into it, the majority of things have already been formulated.” (Anselm Kiefer quoted in Ein Gespräch: Joseph Beuys, Jannis Kounellis, Anselm Kiefer, Enzo Cucchi. Edited by Jacqueline Burckhardt. Ed. Parkett-Verlag, Zurich, 1986, p. 40)



Cette obscure clarté qui tombe des étoiles, 1991-1992
Oil and sunflower seeds on gelatin silver print

The French title, meaning *The dark light that falls from the stars*, is taken from *Le Cid* by Corneille, a play wherein the choice between love and honor are a source of conflict for the protagonists of the story. It refers on one hand, to Kiefer's kinship to France where he moved in 1992, and on the other, to his complicated relationship to his fatherland Germany and its troubled past. *Le Cid* takes on an additional special significance here, as it takes place in Spain and is based on the 11th century Spanish warrior Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar.

Sunflowers are a recurring image in works by Kiefer, not so much for their golden radiance but for their heads packed with black seeds. They are a potent symbol of rebirth, the duality of death and life that is for him a central theme.



Die Meistersinger, 1982
Straw and oil on canvas

This work is inspired by and named after the opera Richard Wagner wrote in 1868, one of the most popular and successful of its time. An epic story that revolves around culture and tradition, it became a symbol of German patriotism in the Arts but eventually co-opted by the Nazis, frequently used as a form of propaganda. Kiefer honors this Wagner masterpiece in his work as a way to restore it from its corrupted legacy, reclaiming what the Nazis had tarnished by their abuse of its optimistic message.

Kiefer's use of straw in his work represents energy. He claims this is due to straw's physical qualities, including the color gold and its release of energy and heat when burned. The resulting ash makes way for new creation, thus echoing the motifs of transformation and the cycle of life. (Albano, Albert P. (1998). "Reflections on Painting, Alchemy, Nazism: Visiting with Anselm Kiefer". *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*)



*Von den Verlorenen gerührt, die der Glaube nicht trug,
erwachen die Trommeln im Fluss, 2005
Gouache and charcoal on photographic paper collage*

The horizon in Kiefer's work is a highly charged symbol of the line between heaven and earth, and in this work, he includes a dress that appears to fly over and transcend its boundaries. The idea of transcendence is furthermore symbolized by the stairs connecting earth to sky.

The title of the work translates to, “the drums in the river came alive, beaten by the lost ones, who were not supported by faith”, which Kiefer has written in the top portion of the collage, as he does in many of his works, reflecting his interest in written traditions. But rather than serving as an explanation to the visual experience or his own specific intentions, he allows us to bring our own associations in to become part of a broader conversation in the spirit of the work.

“When people say that oral and written traditions are different layers, the same holds true for pictures. Here too there is a purely visible presentation and a written one piled on top of each other like shifting slates continually displacing each other.” (*Anselm Kiefer and Thomas H. Macho, A conversation from the catalogue ‘Anselm Kiefer Am Anfang’, Galerie Thaddeus Ropac Salzburg, 2003*)



Velimir Khlebnikov, 2004
Oil, emulsions, acrylic and lead-sculpture on canvas

This work refers to the poet and numerological theorist Velimir Khlebnikov, specifically his notion that a naval battle with significant cosmic consequences on human history occurs every 317 years. Although Kiefer does not necessarily agree with these historical-mathematical theories, he is intrigued by their metaphysical interests and the meticulous computations that led to them, a part of which he has included in this particular work.

There is a discomfort in the juxtaposition of a battleship and the romantic seascape, a tension making it appear to aestheticize war. But upon considering the reference to Khlebnikov, who attacked conventional language and traditional ways of understanding historical development, we begin to observe parallels in Kiefer's work wherein the unconventional confrontation between the horrors of history and the transcendental beauty of the creative act might bring on new perspectives to both.



Schwarze Flocken, 2006
Oil, emulsion, acrylic, charcoal, wood, branches,
burned books and plaster on canvas

Books in Kiefer's work represent personal and collective memory. *Schwarze Flocken* (*Black Flakes*) draws inspiration from a poem of the same name by Paul Celan, a German-speaking Romanian Jew who survived the concentration camps. His parents did not survive: Celan's father died of typhus and his mother was shot when exhausted and deemed unfit for work. One section of Celan's poem reads:

Autumn bled all away, Mother, snow burned me through:
I sought out my heart so it might weep, I found – oh the summer's
breath,
it was like you.

Words from the poem, written by Kiefer in charcoal, recede into the painting's high horizon line.

Snow and ice are symbolic in Celan's poetry of both loss and silence in the face of the Holocaust. This symbolism carries over to Kiefer's canvas, and – in the form of a painting – it gains extra art-historical association. The winter landscape is a staple in 19th-century German Romantic art, a fine example being (the paintings of) Caspar David Friedrich. In Friedrich's work the winter landscape of Germany is sublime and spiritual; in Kiefer's it is testament to the country's dark history.

Critics have seen the branches as representing the barbed wire of the concentration camps. But trees have a wide range of references for Kiefer: for example, he remembers how his family took refuge from Allied bombing in the forest, and his work has often focused on myths associated with trees and wood, such as that of Yggdrasil, the Norse 'World Tree' that shelters the universe. (*"How to read an Anselm Kiefer"* (excerpts), Sam Phillips, Royal Academy, London, 2014)

Provocatively, but perhaps inevitably, book-burning is also in Kiefer's repertoire: he has produced many weighty books, some from sheets of lead, many with carbonized pages, deliberately calling to mind the Nazi delirium, and Heinrich Heine's (1797-1856) prophecy: "Where they have burned books they will end in burning human beings."

Hitler's ruinous legacy, although far from being Kiefer's only subject, has found its way into all corners of his work. Even as he draws on ancient history and mythology, 20th-century literature and philosophy, cosmology, physics, and alchemy, his work is always in dialogue with this more recent history. (*"Anselm Kiefer: Inside a Black Hole"* (excerpts), Sebastian Smeets, Prospect, 2014)



Landschaft bei Buchen, 1971
Watercolour and opaque white on paper



Untitled (Winterbild), Undated
Acrylic and dispersion paint over bromine silver gelatin print, mounted on paper



Siegfried's difficult way to Brünnhilde, 1988
Photograph and treated lead on wood in artist frame

The title of this work refers to the hero of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*), Siegfried, and his journey to the place where his lover, Brünnhilde, sleeps inside a ring of fire. (It is a story of epic scale with gods, heroes and mythical creatures, but its central theme is clear and simple and serves as a forceful message of the dangers of power and the struggles to acquire it.) It is also the title of a 1977 book of photographs Kiefer made on the subject of an abandoned railway bed, a motif that suggests a sense of loss, of forgotten time. "Our historical knowledge . . . determines our way of looking at things," Kiefer once said. "We see railway tracks anywhere and think about Auschwitz. It will remain that way in the long run."

Kiefer discovered lead as an artistic medium while repairing an old washing machine. It appealed to the artist because of its different applications, whether by alchemists who try to turn it into gold or by medical professionals who use it to protect patients from the harmful effects of X-rays. (*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

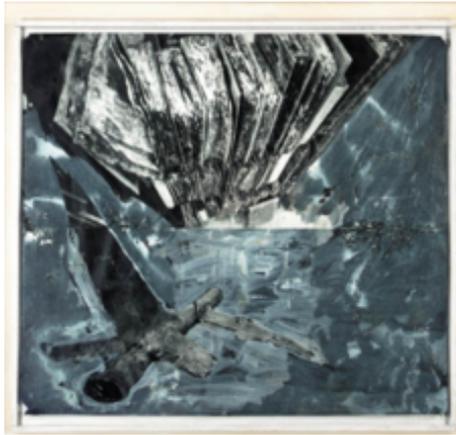
Highly symbolic connections emerge from lead, concrete, dirt, dried plants, barbed wire and the inclusion of found objects such as books, scythes, and model ships. Lead is of particular importance to the artist, who has described it as "the only material heavy enough to carry the weight of human history." (*Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac*)



Die Ungeborenen, 1997
38-page book with photographs laid on cardboard
including cement, fabric, metal, charcoal, straw, paper,
paint, sunflower seeds, and plaster

Die Ungeborenen (The Unborn) is a theme that Kiefer has explored profoundly through major paintings and photographs for many years. He has enigmatically described the term as "the desire of not wanting to be born," referring to the writings of Paul Celan, a poet that he reveres and has often quoted. This work, with its hauntingly cold abandoned views scattered with ash and doll-like dresses, hints at a state of limbo.

The chair is another object that Kiefer includes symbolically in his works. Empty as they are on the pages of this book-form assemblage, they invite us to occupy them and place ourselves in the center of these settings, and therefore in the center of history. To enter this gloomy landscape is a serious challenge requiring moral maturity and psychological courage as we are asked to face the tragic deaths of the innocent.



Der Engel der Geschichte, 1989
Oil on silver gelatin print

Der Engel der Geschichte (The Angel of History) takes its title from an essay written by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) about the *Angelus Novus*, a monoprint by Paul Klee (1879-1940) he purchased in 1921 which would become an ongoing inspiration to him. Benjamin describes the angel in his ninth thesis on the philosophy of history (1940):

A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [London, 1973], p. 259)

Kiefer's 'Angel' is not an angel at all but a rather sinister war plane. As Benjamin expressed his suspicions in his thesis, Kiefer has criticized the 19th and 20th century modernist approach of embracing technology as the great human achievement and salvation. The invention of the jet aircraft was in fact one of the most critical innovations of World War II, much of the success of the German army owed to it. It is with irony that Kiefer relates his work back to Benjamin and Klee, where the messenger of god has turned into the bringer of death and destruction.



*“Ave Maria, turris eburnea”, 2014
Metal, lead, plaster, ash, sand in glass vitrine on artist’s metal plinth*

When making his work, Anselm Kiefer was profoundly inspired by the idea of the tower in history, with many references to the architecture of the past, but especially to its symbolic value. His towers, which each consist of between five and seven modules, testify to what remains after every conflict. Their precarious look does indeed make them appear like ruins, as the memory of a by no means distant past, or the foreboding of a possible future. When looking at them, some have wondered: “Are they the remains of an ancient city, an industrial settlement or of a village with asbestos-cement roofs?” There is no single answer to this question, for there can be many interpretations and everyone can apply their own imagination to them. (*Fondazione Pirelli Hangar Bicocca*)

In the Christian sacred scriptures, the ivory tower is associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus: the reference from which the title Ave Maria turris eburnea (Hail Mary, Ivory Tower) derives. Kiefer also used the image of the tower in *The Seven Heavenly Palaces* (...) which draws its inspiration from an ancient Hebrew treatise where the palaces refer to the path of man’s approach to the divine. (*“Anselm Kiefer: Fallen Angels”, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, 2024*)